

CHILDREN AND GLOBAL DIVERSITY: COLLABORATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING MATERIALS

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Biographical Note

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Caroline Shore worked as a social worker and senior social work practitioner in Health Service Executive (HSE) child protection and welfare teams from 1998 to 2006. She is a lecturer in the Department of Applied Social Studies at UCC. Since 2007 she has also worked as a freelance Guardian ad litem, advocating on behalf of children within the court system. Her research interests are in the area of child protection, particularly the social work response to separated children.

KEYWORDS

Global childhood diversity; children’s rights; learning material development; active learning

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the work of an ongoing research project at University College Cork (UCC) which has sought to further the understanding of students in the BA Early Childhood Studies (BAECS) programme on issues of global diversity, set within childhood contexts. It tracks the process of development of the project thus far, highlighting key teaching and learning insights. The project has been developed in conjunction with members of the BAECS team in the School of Applied Social Studies, UCC and the Hope Foundation, Cork and Kolkata (Calcutta). The

rationale for the project arose through the experiences that students in our programme were having in applying aspects of theoretically based knowledge to placement contexts and reflective practices in increasingly diverse placement contexts. Beginning in 2007, teaching and learning materials were developed in the form of issue-based case studies based on the experiences of, and issues arising for, children with whom the Hope foundation are currently working in Kolkata. Development of materials involved the active participation of undergraduate students in a learning process whereby they are facilitated to deepen their understanding of how learning materials can be developed and of cultural and social diversity, in for instance areas of child trafficking, child labour and child abuse. In involving the students in a critical analysis and reflection of material development, it contributes to their understanding of issues relating to children's rights and facilitates their development as critical early years practitioners who are advocates for children.

INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines a project on the development of learning materials on childhood and global diversity for inclusion in the curriculum of the BA in Early Childhood Studies (BAECS) undergraduate degree at University College Cork (UCC). It traces the origins of this project and highlights the importance given to ongoing communication between Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) researchers, academic staff and students in this project. At the core of this project was the belief that an understanding of global diversity is essential for contemporary early childhood practitioners and that involvement in this project, and the resulting materials produced, would contribute to the development of early years practitioners who are advocates for children in an increasingly globalising world context. The project aimed to contribute to the students' understanding of issues relating to children's rights and citizenship through the development of learning materials on the following five issues: child trafficking, child labour, HIV/AIDS, child abuse, and religion, race and ethnicity, based on the work with which Hope Foundation, Cork and Kolkata, is involved in North East India. It built on existing relations between staff at the School of Applied Social Studies, UCC and personnel working with the Hope Foundation. It employed an approach to teaching and learning that valued the active participation of all involved in the process, in particular students, so as to ensure the materials fully respond to their learning needs. An integral part of the process was the development of new ways of assessing the student learning including student self-assessment. The approach views the teacher/lecturer as a facilitator of learning rather than an expert who imparts knowledge. A second aim of this project was the development of students' capacity to engage in a process of self-reflection that would enable them to become more aware of their own values, attitudes, biases and beliefs in relation to children from other cultures and backgrounds.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF THE PROJECT

The rationale for this project arose from difficulties identified by students in the BAECS in UCC, in making links between theory and their practice-based experience. Our students' placement locations are becoming increasingly diverse. While the more traditional focus of the BAECS has been within a national context, this national context is becoming increasingly multicultural. As such it is important that students have a greater understanding of global development issues and connections, in developing their roles within the diverse fields of social policy and childcare practice. The reality now is that work in childhood areas such as social support, policy, education and analysis is no longer restricted to geographical boundaries. Moosa-Mitha (2007) discusses the importance of understanding the global perspective for the full analysis of children's citizenship particularly for children who are trafficked or subject to sexual exploitation:

"Sexually exploited children who are trafficked into particular communities are not only the result of a global phenomenon, but also have social justice claims as citizens of the world community to the specific state in which they find themselves residing and working. This understanding would translate not only in terms of the importance of

understanding the specific, or the local in terms of the global, but also as re-visioning student's own identities from a local or national basis to one where they understand themselves as members of a world community" (p. 329).

Lindon argues that an important part of developing students' abilities as reflective practitioners is facilitating them to extend their *"knowledge and understanding of equality issues in practice around gender, ethnic group, and cultural background, faith and disability"* (Lindon, 2006, p. 3). Furthermore, Boud (1999) contends that self assessment is particularly important for the training of future practitioners, as students cannot develop into *"competent professionals unless they learn to be actively involved in constructing and reconstructing notions of good practice as they proceed"* (p. 2).

A survey of post-qualifying BAECS students who graduated from UCC between 1998 and 2007 and who were working in a range of early years settings indicated that students wanted input on global development issues. They were specifically concerned with knowing more about the daily lived experiences of children in developing countries as they believed that these insights would facilitate their work with migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking children in Irish child care and educational settings. Huber-Warring and Warring (2006) contend that development among students of a *"culturally responsive pedagogy requires deeper levels of reflection and more culturally sensitive awareness and language usage. Pre-service and in-service pedagogists need to transfer the knowledge base about social justice and global interdependence in actions, inclusive of language, behaviours and practices"* (p. 39). In order to promote such ideals of social justice and global interdependence within education, it is thought that critical reflection should be a central part of the curriculum.

DETAILING THE PROCESS

A pilot project was developed with a view to (i) engaging students in the development of materials, (ii) increasing their awareness and understanding of the diversity in the lives of children globally, and (iii) encouraging their critical reflection on material. The next stage involved bringing the materials together, to a selected pilot student group and the lecturing staff on the programme, in the form of workshop sessions. The project's origins, aims and objectives were introduced to the second year students in September 2008, and students were offered the opportunity to volunteer to participate in the project. Seventeen students volunteered and were offered the opportunity to liaise directly with the Hope Foundation workers and UCC lecturers in the development of these materials. The students were then divided into five thematic working groups, who each worked in small groups of three or four under the supervision of a member of the lecturing staff. Six tutorial sessions were scheduled between October to December 2008. During these sessions:

- Students were introduced to the project and an outline of its aims and objectives were detailed to them.
- Each group of students worked on one of the five topics already identified by the project.
- Initially, having introduced students to their topics, they were invited to discuss them in general and thereafter carry out some research on them, to familiarise themselves with key issues arising. They were facilitated in this process by the lecturing staff. The model was one of democratic discussion and sharing of information in which the lecturer had a facilitating rather than didactic role.

Thereafter, they were introduced to the materials produced by Hope Foundation, Kolkata and following discussion on them were requested to review the material specifically commenting on their accessibility to them. Students' responses were discussed and, where possible, UCC lecturing staff clarified any issues arising. Thereafter, issues were collated and communicated to Hope workers in Kolkata. A key part of this process was the recognition of the significance of whatever issues arose through students' participation, and their role within the constructive development of materials was emphasised. In November 2008 and February 2009 workshops with the Kolkata co-ordinator of the project were organised. In these workshops, students: (i) discussed their learning and sought further clarification on issues arising, and (ii) presented research posters that they had developed within their groups. Furthermore, a series of three lectures on equality, global diversity and childhood were incorporated into an existing module and delivered to the full student cohort. This series of lectures introduced issues of diversity arising in the contemporary context, they incorporated theoretical elements, and engaged the students in discussions of case studies presented on child labour and trafficking.

ASSESSMENT

Students in the pilot group undertook two assignments in lieu of the traditional essays students are required to submit for their second year social studies modules. Both of these assignments were completely new to the programme. The assignments focused on facilitating the students to develop their knowledge of childhood diversity, through the particular issue on which they were working, and encouraged them to locate the new learning materials within a theoretical and policy framework as well as critically reflecting on the content, structure, layout and scope of the material.

The first assignment focused on the learning and reflection process and had three elements. Firstly, students were awarded marks for attendance. Secondly, students self-awarded a mark for group participation; and finally, they had to produce an individual written reflection on the following:

- The group research process - organisation of tasks, meetings etc.;
- An outline of the individuals' contribution to the project- tasks, key areas of examination and analysis;
- Reflection on how their participation and learning in the project could assist in their development as an early year's practitioner.
- Students were given a self-assessment grid to complete at the end of each workshop with their tutor, with some guidelines on rating levels of participation.

The second assignment was aimed at bringing their knowledge and understanding together through developing a research project. For this, students were required to provide a twenty-five minute presentation and a group research poster outlining why they had become involved in the project, highlighting key areas of learning during their participation in this project and reflecting on the challenges of contributing to the development of learning materials.

PROJECT OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION

Given that this was the first time we had used the self-evaluation method with students, students were asked to discuss the usefulness of the self-evaluation tool for them. The students, in their evaluation of the project and through their assessments, identified the following as outcomes of their participation in the project:

- High levels of engagement with the project materials, assessments and the process in general;
- Connections being made between children living in different parts of the world and in diverse circumstances;
- Grounded understanding of issues of diversity emerging;
- Ability to critically analyse material;
- Engagement in reflective practice;
- Development of independent learning skills;
- Increased confidence in presentation skills;
- Development of good working relationships with individual staff.

As stated the intention in developing these materials was that they would facilitate students in making links between theory and practice and that they would develop knowledge and understanding among students of global development contexts and issues of cultural and social diversity. It also contributed to the students understanding of issues relating to children's rights and facilitated their development as early years practitioners who are advocates for children. The following comments made by students are noteworthy in this respect:

"We have now realised that although Ireland and India are different in many ways, child abuse is a global problem".

"The project has given me as a practitioner the understanding of what cultural diversity actually means".

Feedback from students also indicated that they found the production of research posters, in particular, a very worthwhile experience, firstly because it developed a new skill, and secondly because they have a concrete result from their work (each student was presented with a professionally produced copy of their research poster at the end of the academic year). Also, the group work assignment was insightful in that students commented on the value of this approach over individual work, Again it is worth drawing attention to student comments in this regard:

"the group influence encouraged me to work to my full potential", 'each person's contribution would generate ideas for the whole group".

Students were asked to complete a form at the end of each meeting with their tutor, awarding themselves a mark for their level of participation in order to develop their capacity for self-evaluation and reflection (from one to two for very poor participation in discussion with limited evidence of preparation for the tutorial and a negative or unmotivated attitude, to eight to ten for all round excellence in terms of preparation and engagement with the process). Students at first found this very challenging as demonstrated by this comment from one student participant:

"I was ... shocked at the fact that we were given the responsibility of evaluating ourselves. I was initially very unsure about this and thought that everyone would give themselves top marks so as to get a good grade. Knowing the responsibility was on us to evaluate ourselves, each week I found myself asking what more could I do this week? Why do I deserve to get a good mark this week?"

However, students did not automatically give themselves 'top marks' and took the process very seriously, engaging in good levels of argument and reflection on their work in justifying marks awarded. This also proved to be a useful tool for lecturers, in that it helped to clarify expectations of students in the process and offered insights into students' perceptions of the tutorials.

CONCLUSION

From the outset we were interested in providing the students with an active learning context and were informed through a teaching ethos that views the student as a participant in their learning, and not a passive recipient of knowledge. We also wished to contribute towards an applied learning experience in which the students would also be facilitated in linking their more theoretical knowledge with practice contexts. We found the students responded in a very positive manner to such an approach. They felt privileged to be involved in the process of developing learning materials. They organised extra group research classes and requested further class time with lecturers in order to more fully understand the issues they were researching. Students were asked to self-assess their participation, and were given guidelines on how they might do this. This was not a method of assessment with which they were familiar and initially some students resisted it. Later, they all commented on how it encouraged their own critical self-reflection. However, acceptance of students' self assessment is not wholly encouraged within traditional systems of assessment, and could only be incorporated as a portion of the overall assessment exercise, reducing its effectiveness. Furthermore, the emphasis in this project was on the process, and again, attempting to measure this sort of engagement within a modular system that is focused on measurable outputs was challenging. The ongoing goal is to sustain the process-driven elements of the course, within this less flexible modular system.

A further consideration is that of incorporating the materials into the BAECs curriculum. The learning materials are now available as working papers. The development of learning has engaged the lecturing staff and students in the programme in active participatory collaborative research which is grounded in the learning needs of students on the programme and which will contribute to the development of the curriculum in contemporary global contexts.

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